

Tips for a Happy Autism Christmas

The Christmas season brings lots of changes in familiar routines at home and changes in the environment with lots of decorations being displayed. Parties and family celebrations can be very exciting but the social expectations often result in it being a very stressful time of the year for many children with autism (and for adults). In school, timetables are changed to allow for rehearsals for Christmas carol concerts and plays, Christmas dinner, end of term parties and Father Christmas visiting. If school is different, it can make the child anxious because everything is unpredictable and their world doesn't make sense. The media and advertisements illustrate a picture of what a family Christmas is like and we often have an expectation that we can create the perfect image they portray. We all want to manage Christmas for everyone to enjoy and for the child with autism to be part of the celebrations but it can mean we are anxious and dreading certain events especially if they created a problem last year.

Using visuals to Support the changes

Children with autism find changes difficult to cope with. Information provided visually is much easier to process when the child is anxious and being able to independently check the information helps to reduce anxiety.



❖ Print out a 'Christmas Count Down Calendar' showing the whole of December and mark on it everything that is happening over the next few weeks. Add pictures to link the calendar to the child's special interest (trains, animals, dinosaurs, Minecraft etc.) as this will help them connect to it.

❖ Highlight the next event on the calendar and cross it off afterwards as this helps the child focus on one thing at a time.

Click <http://www.autismtrain.co.uk/resources/> to download your Countdown Calendar

- ❖ Make sure the child knows the plans for each day as soon as possible.
- ❖ **Use a visual timetable** showing the planned activities for each day. For older children and teenagers get them to put information in their planner, diary or on their phone

❖ Use the 'change' card.

Clearly explain what is going to change, when it is going to change, and for how long it is going to be different. Even a small change can upset the child if they are not prepared for it.

- ❖ Use a timer or clock to explain to the child how long they are going to stay at a party, Christmas event or people's houses.



Sensory

Christmas can be a very stressful time for children who may be hypersensitive to taste, touch, sounds, smell and visual stimulus. For example, busy environments, balloons, flashing lights, music, food smells, new clothes and party poppers can all cause anxiety. It is not unusual for a sensory experience that the child was enjoying to cause them to become over excited and overwhelmed.

- ❖ If possible, let the child be in control of the sensory experience. For example, let them control the buttons on the battery lights or by providing ear defenders for use in noisy situations.
- ❖ Let the child help to put up Christmas decorations. Children with autism like to be in control and being involved means the changes to the environment at home or school is less of a surprise and makes it easier for them to cope with.
- ❖ Let the child hold a sensory toy or object in their hand, such as a stress ball or bluTack.

Presents

Giving and receiving presents is a large part of Christmas. For children with autism this can be far more complicated as they may not be interested in traditional toys. They might have difficulty sharing toys with others and not understand that all the presents under the tree are not for them.

- ❖ Consider leaving your child's stocking in the lounge/dining room rather than the end of their bed. The thought of Father Christmas coming into their bedroom (their safe space) when they are asleep may cause anxiety.
- ❖ Sometimes it can be enough to open just one present on Christmas day and keep the others for another day as sometimes the 'surprise element can be too much.

Christmas food

The child may have a restricted diet and not be able to tolerate certain textures or colours of foods. Eating issues are usually easier to cope with at home with just close family but at Christmas there are often shared meals and celebrations with relatives and friends. This can increase the stress for everyone. Plan ahead so that the occasion is as successful as possible.

- ❖ If you are having a celebration meal at someone else's house explain before the day that the problem is not that your child is just being a fussy, but has an eating sensitivity that can occur with autism. With the situation explained most people won't take offense that the child doesn't eat what has been prepared.
- ❖ If the child is attending a party or Christmas lunch at school and their diet is very restricted provide a plate of food for your child.
- ❖ If the child won't sit at the table for long or even at all, provide the child with access to whatever will keep them occupied so that everyone else can eat and enjoy the meal. You can work on this skill gradually at home during the year and maybe next year the child will sit for longer.
- ❖ If the child usually has a specific plate, cup, spoon, etc, at home then take them with you as these familiar items will help the child.

Christmas Events

Think about situations that are just too difficult for the child to cope with such as a large food shop that is going to take ages and have a plan to support the child. Perhaps enlist the help of family or a friend to look after the child while you shop, shop late in the evening when it is quieter or order everything on the internet.

Attending Church, concerts or performing in Christmas plays can be overwhelming for some children.

- ❖ Visit the church or venue for the play before the event
- ❖ Choose a seat for them on the end of a row so that they can leave if it becomes too much
- ❖ Give the child a job to keep them focused e.g. looking after a prop for the play
- ❖ Use prompt cards for 'quiet', 'good sitting'
- ❖ Provide a quiet place for the child so they can watch from a distance
- ❖ Create a quiet, calm, Christmas-free area.
- ❖ Make a 'calm box' containing activities that the child enjoys as it may distract and help to avoid a melt-down.
- ❖ Think about what is a realistic time your child can successfully manage and explain to the host/friends you want this to be a positive experience for your child and you feel arriving later or leaving early will help.

Remember the child might not be able to cope with a particular Christmas activity this year but celebrate what they do achieve and recognize it is a 'working towards' situation and next year they might be able to happily participate more.

